I want first of all to thank David Vasquez and the other Campus Pastors for their support of this Chapel Series. What a blessing to have pastors so committed to our faith and learning dialogue.

I also want to thank Professors Kate Narveson, Jim Griesheimer, and Jane Kemp whose preaching in this series has so marvelously fulfilled the “Our Shakespeare” project goal, which is to “nurture our community’s rediscovery of the range, power, and wisdom of Shakespeare’s art.”

My talk today has a simple thesis that could also serve for those other three talks: Listening to the conversation between Shakespeare and the Bible will help us understand both of them better.

Shakespeare’s use of the Bible is quite remarkable. Even without considering the huge number of references to faith, religion, or Christianity in general, Shakespeare’s works contain many hundreds of references to at least forty different Biblical books.

Shakespeare’s 1597 play 1 Henry IV, which Paideia I students are currently reading, and which my students from English-Theatre/Dance 261 will be performing five times this week in a one-hour abridgement, has at least fifty-five direct Biblical references, including a number of references to the story of the Prodigal Son. This story undergirds the play’s central plot-line focused on King Henry IV, who has two sons—an older son nicknamed Hal, who is wasting his youth in riotous living, and a younger brother, John, who is righteously serving his father.
The Prodigal Son story is found only in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15: 11-32. I read here—as we have done for all the talks in this Shakespeare series—from the 1611 King James version on the occasion of its four-hundred year anniversary.

A certaine man had two sonnes:

And the yonger of them said to his father, Father, giue me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he diuided vnto them his liuing. And not many dayes after, the yonger sonne gathered al together, and tooke his iourney into a farre countrey, and there wasted his substance with riotous liuing. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land, and he beganne to be in want. And he went and ioyned himselfe to a citizen of that countrey, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would faine haue filled his belly with the huskes that the swine did eate: & no man gaue vnto him. And when he came to himselfe, he said, How many hired seruants of my fathers haue bread inough and to spare, and I perish with hunger? I will arise and goe to my father, and will say vnto him, Father, I haue sinned against heauuen and before thee. And am no more worthy to be called thy sonne: make me as one of thy hired seruants. And he arose and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ranne, and fell on his necke, and kissed him. And the sonne said vnto him, Father, I haue sinned against heauuen, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy sonne. But the father saide to his seruants, Bring foorth the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shooes on his feete. And bring hither the fatted calfe, and kill it, and let vs eate and be merrie. For this my sonne was dead, and is aliue againe; hee was lost, & is found. And they began to be merie. Now his elder sonne was in the field, and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musicke & dauncing, And he called one of the seruants, and asked what these things meant. And he said vnto him, Thy brother is come, and thy father hath killed the fatted calfe, because he hath receiued him safe and sound. And he was
angry, and would not goe in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him. And he answering said to his father, Loe, these many yeeres doe I serue thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandement, and yet thou neuer gauest mee a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soone as this thy sonne was come, which hath deoured thy liuing with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calfe. And he said vnto him, Sonne, thou art euer with me, and all that I haue is thine. It was meete that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is aliue againe: and was lost, and is found.

Shakespeare’s play establishes the prodigal son theme in its first scene. The English King Henry IV has just recently become king after deposing, and perhaps murdering, the previous king. In frustration with his son’s riotous living, Henry makes the remarkable wish that he would discover that his son and the great young English soldier Hotspur had been traded in their cradles.

The son Hal, in the meantime, is aware of his reputation and announces in a soliloquy that he is waiting for the right time to prove himself worthy of his future position as king. Nevertheless, in the following scenes Hal participates in a robbery and continues to fool around in the taverns while the nation careens towards civil war.

When war breaks out, Hal is called to appear before his father. In one of the great scenes in all of Shakespeare, Hal and his friend/mentor Falstaff decide to prepare Hal for that meeting by role-playing the situation, with Falstaff first playing the king and Hal playing himself, and then reversing roles. This is high comedy, as Falstaff chides Hal for his dissolute life, but notes that there is one virtuous man—meaning himself—who he has seen in Hal’s company. In his performance as king, Hal flips the joke and notes that among his companions there is one particularly “villainous, abominable misleader of youth, [an] old white-bearded Satan,” who Falstaff, acting the role of the son, admits knowing of, but defends. In both of these rehearsed versions the father condemns his son. And that’s exactly what
happens the next day when Hal comes before his father, who harshly rants for many hundreds of lines about his son’s failure to imitate his own careful, strategic, manipulative steps towards power.

The play’s turning point comes at the end of this scene when Hal announces to his father that he will transform himself, defeat his rival Hotspur, and thereby double his own glory. The king seems convinced, gives Hal charge of an army, and announces, “A hundred thousand rebels die in this” (3.2.160). One moving feature of the story, though, is that the king’s doubts remain. When Hal saves his father’s life during the battle of Shrewsbury, his Henry announces that he is now really convinced that his son does care for him. And then again in the play’s sequel, Henry IV, part 2, Henry on his deathbed pathetically accuses his son of wishing him dead so that he can have the crown for himself.

If life and Chapel were long enough, I could work out further the intricate ways in which Shakespeare uses and modifies the Biblical story. But this rough outline is one side of the Bible/Shakespeare conversation.

It might rightly be said, however, that although Shakespeare refers many times to the Bible, the Bible never refers to Shakespeare. Is this, then, a one-sided conversation? I want to suggest that we can fruitfully construct the other half of the conversation by using Shakespeare to interrogate the Biblical text.

To what degree, for example, is the Prodigal Son being manipulative? Part of Hal’s richness of character is that he seems to combine both repentance and calculation. Like Hal, the biblical Prodigal Son practices what he will say to his father, and he follows his own script exactly. Does that mean he is insincere? Does it matter? Jesus, or the Gospel writer, carefully avoids saying.

Another question is the situation of the brother—in Shakespeare younger, in Luke older. In 1 Henry IV the brother John seems almost a cipher, a
bystander who follows his father’s wishes and thereby earns everyone’s praise for his loyalty. But in 2 Henry IV he comes into his own: in order to avoid an impending battle, he tells the rebel leaders that if they surrender they will be treated with leniency; when they surrender, he has them all executed. One might say that young John has not only served his father, but has outdone him in his Machiavellian trickery. As I re-read the Biblical text, I find myself wondering what the father’s expectations of this elder son have been, and what it means that he has “served” his father. Did he serve by imitating, as John does? If so, why is the older brother in Luke so surprised by his father’s actions, and why isn’t he in the end more like his father?

And then there’s the father himself. I’ve heard many a sermon that has explained that the Prodigal Son parable is not about the sons at all, but about the father, who represents God’s grace-filled mercy towards his “lost sheep.” As Shakespeare has reworked this story, exploring the father’s expectations and the son’s ambivalent fulfillment of his father’s wishes, he works out the works/grace dialectic so central to all Christian theology. And Shakespeare knows that’s what he’s doing. As Falstaff says about his and Hal’s common friend Poins, “Oh if men were to be saved by merit, what hole in hell were hot enough for him?” (1.2.95). Hamlet, in a similarly Lutheran mood, perhaps from his years at Wittenberg University, asks a similar question: “Use every man after his desert, and who should ‘scape whipping?” (Hamlet 2.2.552)

As I re-read the Biblical text in light of this theme of Shakespeare’s play, I find myself with questions. The father has freely given his possessions to his son when he leaves and when he returns, no questions asked. But what will he do if the son again “wastes his substance in riotous living”? Will he forgive again and again, and again? Jesus in other places seems to suggest as much. And yet the father has called his son “dead,” presumably because he has, to use the son’s words, “sinned against heauen, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy sonne.” Clearly the father has had
some standards and expectations that his son has failed to live up to. Can expectations themselves ever be freed of obligation? Is the gift totally free, when it somehow constructs for the receiver the appropriate response?

Falstaff hits at the nub of this problem in a wonderful, theologically-rich response when he is criticized for being a thief: “Why, Hal, 'tis my vocation, Hal; 'tis no sin for a man to labour in his vocation” (1.2.92) In other words, would it be possible for the father to repeatedly accept and welcome back a son whose most natural “vocation” was to be a wastrel and a manipulative liar who repeatedly and falsely confesses his sins in order to gain the father’s gifts? Is that the God the Gospel is imagining?

I want, here at the end of my talk, to rephrase my thesis, which is that we are blessed to have both the Biblical parable of the prodigal Son and Shakespeare’s play about Henry V’s youth. Each author tells a powerful, meaningful story. But together, the two stories help us find in the other even greater power and meaning. In other words, one way to fruitfully engage in Bible study is to study Shakespeare.

I had originally suggested the title “Faith and Shakespeare” for this series, which is why that title slipped into last week’s printed bulletins. I changed the title because I wanted to suggest not only that there is faith visible within Shakespeare’s works, but that as we look for help in examining our own beliefs, we can have “Faith in Shakespeare” to provide us some of the help we need.

Amen.